

WRITING ESSAY EXAMINATIONS

A. Identification questions: you will be expected to clearly identify or define ("who or what, when, where, and historical significance") of each item. Identification answers should be brief and as specific as possible. As an example:

Charlemagne -- Frankish King, (768 - 814), unified Frankish and Lombard kingdoms, proclaimed Emperor in 800; provided unity and stimulated cultural revival in northwestern Europe.

B. Essay questions: Essays are coherent paragraphs developing (arguing or illustrating) a topic (theme or thesis) in a clear and logical manner. An essay has a clear introduction, a body of evidence and argumentation, and a firm conclusion based on what was written. Exam essays should have very brief, to the point introductions and conclusions. The bulk should be in the body of the essays. Write your essay as if the person reading it knows nothing about the subject or any related ideas that may have been covered in class; your essay is their only resource for the topic, and thus must cover it completely.

Some pointers:

1. **BE SURE YOU UNDERSTAND THE QUESTION.** Read it carefully, ask the instructor to clarify items that seem unclear. Do not write unless you are sure what is being asked.
2. **MAKE AN OUTLINE:** Plan what you intend to say. The outline should be very brief, but should contain enough to allow you to determine if this is what you want to say. Make sure that you have a definite organization. Take a definite stand.
3. **A GOOD INTRODUCTION IS ESSENTIAL.** This should be a clear paragraph to indicate your thesis, and indicate what you will discuss. Do not write down the question; start in your own words, but in such a way that anyone reading your essay should be able to determine the key elements of the question without referring to the exam sheet. Make sure you are addressing the ENTIRE question, and ONLY that question.
4. **USE PARAGRAPHS.** If the question requires you to discuss or evaluate several different items, use a separate paragraph for each one. Tie the paragraphs together with transitional sentences. Above all, you must be clear.
5. **USE PRECISE EVIDENCE.** Make sure it supports your argument. Use factual evidence such as names, important events, dates, and similar information. Do not, however, simply list information without showing how it fits into the discussion. Avoid "shotgunning" or the "kitchen sink" approach (throwing in everything you know on similar topics, regardless of its relation to the question). (Regarding dates: as a general rule, if the person grading the exam writes "when?" next to an essay, it will not receive a grade higher than "B+".)

6. **TIE YOUR DISCUSSION OR EVALUATION TOGETHER IN A CONCLUSION.**
Summarize your argument and relate it to your thesis. Do not simply repeat, but do not add new material here.
7. **KEEP TO THE POINT.** Throughout the essay, excess verbiage is time lost. There is a difference between simply piling up words and developing an argument. You must get to the point quickly but clearly. Try to be concise, but do not leave out important information. Write enough to answer all points of the question, but do so quickly.
8. **LEAVE MARGINS FREE.** Do not fill all of the available blank space in your bluebook; leave enough space for the person grading the exam to make comments in the margins.